BRILL

STUDIA ISLAMICA 114 (2019) 219-247

brill.com/si

Heraclius' War Propaganda and the Qur'ān's Promise of Reward for Dying in Battle

Tommaso Tesei
IAS Princeton
ttesei@ias.edu

Abstract

In this article I compare the Qur'ānic promise of reward for those who die in battle with similar concepts found in contemporaneous Byzantine military circles, and specifically, the idea promoted by emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641 CE) that soldiers might obtain the "crown of martyrdom" for dying on the battlefield. This idea has almost no antecedent in late antique society. Previously the martyr had been a passive figure slain by an unfaithful enemy, rather than a soldier engaged in a fight to impose (or to avenge) the true faith. Heraclius' understanding of military martyrdom was arguably a revolutionary innovation. Since no attempt was made to either canonize or popularize on a large scale this point of Heraclius' propaganda, the concept of military martyrdom must have been limited to the narrow circle of persons who were actively involved in military activities. For this reason, it is surprising that very similar concepts occur in the Qur'ān – that was composed in the very same historical period. The question that I will ask is whether the ideas expressed in the Qur'ān have any relationship to those promoted by imperial propagandists and, if so, the channel or channels through which this transmission took place.

Keywords

Heraclius – Qur'ān – Martyrdom – Armenia – Byzantium – Islamic Origins – Late Antiquity

Résumé

Dans cet article, je compare la promesse de récompense annoncée par le Coran à ceux qui meurent au combat avec des concepts similaires à ceux rencontrés dans les

 | DOI:10.1163/19585705-12341397

milieux militaires byzantins contemporains, et plus précisément à l'idée défendue par l'empereur Héraclius (r. 610-641 de notre ère) que les soldats pourraient obtenir la « couronne du martyre » en mourant sur le champ de bataille. Cette idée n'a presque pas d'antécédent dans la société de l'Antiquité tardive. Auparavant, le martyr était un personnage passif tué par un ennemi infidèle, plutôt qu'un soldat engagé dans un combat pour imposer (ou venger) la vraie foi. La compréhension du martyre militaire par Héraclius était sans doute une innovation révolutionnaire. Comme aucune tentative n'a été faite pour canoniser ou répandre à grande échelle cet aspect de la propagande d'Héraclius, la notion de martyre militaire devait s'être limitée au cercle restreint des personnes activement impliquées dans des activités militaires. Pour cette raison, il est surprenant que des concepts très similaires apparaissent dans le Coran – celui-ci a été composé à la même période historique. La question est de savoir si les idées exprimées dans le Coran ont un lien quelconque avec celles préconisées par les propagandistes impériaux et, le cas échéant, le ou les canaux par lesquels cette transmission a eu lieu.

Mots-clés

Héraclius – Qur'ān – Martyre – Arménie – Byzance – Islam des débuts – Antiquité tardive

In his monograph *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity*, Thomas Sizgorich highlights the fact that militant piety was not an uncommon element of late antique religious life. Bishops, priests and monks reportedly encouraged or took part in the assault on pagan temples, destruction of idols or forced baptism of members of different confessional communities. According to Sizgorich, religious zeal provided the basis for the emergence of the Islamic concept of militant devotion. He situates "the place of pious violence in the early Islamic imagery" within the lines of "older models of militancy on God's behalf."[1] Sizgorich makes almost no reference to militant piety in the Qur'ān. However, it may be easily argued that the Arabic text displays strong connections with those elements of Christian zeal that later influenced the Islamic conceptualization of militant devotion. It is conceivable that late antique patterns of militancy influenced not only traditional narratives of Islamic origins but also the early Islamic movement itself.

In this article I argue that one of these patterns of militancy may have been adopted by the members of the early Qur'ānic community. Specifically, I will

1 T. Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity. Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam*, Philadelphia, University of Pensilvenia Press, 2009, 13-14.

compare the Qur'ānic promise of reward for those who die in battle with similar concepts found in contemporaneous Byzantine military circles. In doing so, I will explore a documentary area that Sizgorich leaves aside in his study, that is, the witness of Byzantine war propagandists at the service of the emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641 CE). The importance of this field of investigation for the study of the development of militant piety in Islam should not be underestimated. Heraclius promoted an unprecedented sacralization of warfare and an innovative understanding of martyrdom on the battlefield. Many aspects of Heraclius' war propaganda transformed the role that soldiers might play in God's plan for human salvation. Soldiers might now obtain the "crown of martyrdom" for dying on the battlefield. My main goal here is to evaluate whether this paradigm shift was absorbed by the early Islamic movement and thus represents a crucial step in the formulation of the Islamic notion of militant devotion. The question that I will ask is whether the ideas expressed in the Qur'ān have any relationship to those promoted by imperial propagandists and, if so, the channel or channels through which this transmission took place.

The essay is divided into three sections. First, I analyze the promulgation, under Heraclius, of the idea that soldiers may aspire to obtain martyrdom on the battlefield. Second, I study the Qur'ānic idea of heavenly reward for warriors who died in battle and its relation to the general Qur'ānic attitude towards warfare and militancy. Third, I address my working question and try to provide an answer about the connection between Qur'ānic and Byzantine promises of afterlife compensation for those who lost their lives on the battlefield. Before starting my investigation, however, a terminological clarification is necessary.

1 Martyrdom in the Qur'ān: a Terminological Problem

The common Arabic word for martyr is *šahīd*. This word notoriously carries the meaning of both "witness" and "martyr," and thus replicates the semantic ambivalence of the Greek *martys* (and of the Syriac *šāhdā*). It is probably under the influence of Christian usage that the term *šahīd*, literally meaning "witness," came to assume the secondary meaning of "martyr," although it is impossible to ascertain when this semantic shift occurred. *Šahīd* and the related words *šahāda* and *istišhād* appear to signify "martyr" and "martyrdom" in a corpus of early Islamic graffiti (ca. 690-740 CE) recently studied by Lindstedt.[2] However, we have no evidence that the term *šahīd* already signified "martyr" at

2 I. Lindstedt, "Religious warfare and martyrdom in Arabic graffiti (70s-110s AH/690s-730s CE)," in *Scripts and Scripture: Writing and Religion in Arabia ca. 500-700 CE*, ed. F. Donner, Chicago, Oriental Institute, forthcoming.

the time of the redaction of the Qurʾān (the exact date of which is uncertain). As a matter of fact, *šahīd* occurs more than 150 times in the Qurʾān but never in the sense of "martyr."[3] The Qurʾān surely praises those who die as a result of religious violence and in some instances it promises them eschatological privileges. These persons can be defined "martyrs" insofar as – according to our understanding of this term – they are awarded a special reward in the afterlife for dying a violent death while defending or – less frequently – imposing, their faith. Conceptually, the idea exposed in some Qurʾānic passages, namely, that God will compensate those who die in battle, is doubtless similar to Heraclius' understanding of battlefield martyrdom as described in the sources examined below. Yet, the Qurʾān lacks a specific terminology to address the recipients of this type of heavenly reward. The Qurʾānic author(s) did not choose the word *šahīd* to designate these persons – either because the term had not yet come to signify "martyr," or for other reasons unknown to us. Martyrs in the Qurʾān are never called *šuhadāʾ*, nor are they designated by any term comparable to the Greek *martys*. In light of these observations, and in an effort to avoid improper conceptualizations and possible anachronisms, in this essay I will refrain from talking about Qurʾānic military martyrdom. Instead, I will refer to the idea of self-sacrifice and, more often, to the Qurʾān's promise of reward for dying in combat.

2 Heraclius' War Propaganda: "May we win the crown of martyrdom!"

In 591-592 the Byzantine emperor Maurice (r. 582-602) helped the Sasanian king Khosrow II to retake possession of his throne after it had been seized by Bahrām Chōbin (d. 591). Ten years later, in 602, Maurice was killed in a court conspiracy led by the usurper Phocas (r. 602-610). The murder of Maurice provided Khosrow with a pretext to invade the Byzantine territories. The war lasted almost three decades. In the first phase of the conflict, the Sasanians prevailed, occupying several Byzantine provinces, including Palestine and Egypt. The tide turned, however, with the ascent of Heraclius in 610. Starting from Byzantine Africa, Heraclius led a revolt against Phocas and seized the Byzantine throne. Afterwards, the new emperor invaded Sasanian territory. In 628 he imposed a treaty that was signed by the new Sasanian sovereign

3 The only possible (but not entirely convincing) exception occurs in Q 3:140 "If a wound touches you, a like wound already has touched the heathen; such days We deal out in turn among men, and that God may know who are the believers, and that He may take witnesses (*šuhadāʾ*) from among you; and God loves not the evildoers." Arberry's translation.

Kavadh II (r. February-September 628), who had recently dethroned his father, Khosrow.

During his reign, Heraclius promoted an intense propagandistic campaign.[4] The imperial propaganda took different shapes and was circulated in different media, including court ceremonial, public sermons, coinage and literary texts. Using these different channels, Heraclius spread the message that the present age represented a crucial moment in sacred history. The conflict with the Sasanians was not a simple clash between empires, but rather a confrontation between the true religion, Christianity, and the false Zoroastrian cult. Soldiers were told that they were fighting not only in the emperor's name but also to avenge offenses that the Sasanians had committed against God. The war was depicted as a cosmic struggle between good and evil.[5]

Heraclius' policies during the conflict with the Sasanians have attracted considerable scholarly attention, especially the idea of sacred war. Some scholars have argued that Heraclius' conduct of the conflict against the Sasanians may be considered as a model of a proto-crusade. Others have argued that the concept of holy war was alien to the Byzantines, as suggested by their failure to develop their own model of crusade in response to the challenge of Islamic expansion.[6] What is undeniable is that Heraclius' policies during and immediately after the conflict included an unprecedented degree of religious rhetoric. It is this previously unparalleled mélange of religion and warfare that

4 As Howard-Johnston observes, "almost the only type of aggressive action which Heraclius could take from 614 to 621 was the dissemination of propaganda. The object was to enhance the loyalty of his remaining subjects, to retain that of his former subjects in the occupied provinces of the Near East, and to arouse opposition among the numerous Christian peoples living in the Transcaucasian component of the Persian empire." J. Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius' Persian Campaigns and the Revival of the East Roman Empire, 622-630", *War in History* 6 (1999), 36.

5 For a general overview, see Y. Stoyanov, *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross: the Sasanian Conquest of Jerusalem in 614 and Byzantine Ideology of Anti-Persian Warfare*, Veroefentlichungen zur Iranistik 61, Vienna (Verlag der Oesterreichichen Akademie der Wissenschaften), 2011.

6 On this debate, see I. Stouraitis, "'Just War' and 'Holy War' in the Middle Ages. Rethinking Theory through the Byzantine Case-Study," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 62 (2012), 235 ff.; A. Kolia-Dermitzaki, "'Holy War' In Byzantium Twenty Years Later: A Question of Term Definition and Interpretation," in *Byzantine War Ideology. Between Roman Imperial Concept and Christian Religion*, ed. J. Koder, I Stouraitis, (Wien: Verlag der Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011), 121-32; Stoyanov. *Defenders*, 33-6 and 42-4; A. Laiou, "The Just War of Eastern Christians and the Holy War of the Crusaders," in *The Ethics of War: Shared Problems in Different Traditions*, ed. R. Sorabji, D. Rodin, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006, 33-4; G. T. Dennis, "Defenders of the Christian People: Holy War in Byzantium," in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. A. E. Laiou, R. P. Mottahedeh, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks, 2001, 34-5.

provides the framework for the innovative concept of martyrdom promoted by Heraclius during the final phase of the war.

In the summer of 624, as Heraclius' troops were penetrating Sasanian territory, the emperor encouraged his soldiers to avenge the enemy's insults against the true God, exhorting them as follows: "The danger is not without recompense; nay it leads to the eternal life. Let us stand bravely, and the Lord our God will assist us and destroy the enemy."[7] One year later, in a difficult situation, Heraclius addressed the army again: "Be not disturbed, O brethren, by the multitude of [the Persian army]. For when God wills it, one man will rout a thousand. So let us sacrifice ourselves to God for the salvation of our brothers. May we win the crown of martyrdom (*λάβωμεν στέφος μαρτύρων*) so that we may be praised in future [*sic*] and receive our recompense from God."[8]

Heraclius' speeches to his troops are reported by Theophanes in his *Chronicle*, a work completed in the early 9th century. However, Theophanes drew the two passages from a lost work of Heraclius' panegyrist George of Pisidia.[9] Thus, the contents of Heraclius' speeches reported by Theophanes likely reflect ideas that the emperor expressed or promoted during his campaigns against the Sasanians. Similar propaganda is found in the *History* composed by Theophylact Simocatta, a contemporary of Heraclius. Theophylact reports a speech by the Byzantine general Justinian to his troops on the eve of the battle of Melitene, fought against a Sasanian army in 576. The general reportedly addressed the soldiers as follows: "Today angels are recruiting you and are recording the souls of the dead, providing for them not a corresponding recompense, but one that infinitely exceeds in the weight of the gift."[10] Justinian's words here are very similar to those of Heraclius in Theophanes' work. It is unlikely, however, that Justinian ever spoke these words. Since Theophylact

7 *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284-813*, ed. C. Mango, R. Scott, New York, Clarendon Press, 1997, 438-39.

8 Ibid., 442-43.

9 The reliability of Theophanes' report can hardly be questioned. As Stephenson observes: "When reproducing materials from extant works by George and others, Theophanes proves to be a reliable copyist." P. Stephenson, "Religious Services for Byzantine Soldiers and the Possibility of Martyrdom, c. 400-c. 1000," in *Just Wars, Holy Wars, and Jihads: Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Encounters and Exchanges*, ed. S. H. Hashmi (Oxford University Press, 2012), 42, n. 30. On Theophanes' use of George of Pisidia's works, see Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius' Persian Campaigns", 8-11; M. Whitby, "George of Pisidia's Presentation of the Emperor Heraclius and His Campaigns: Variety and Development," in *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation* Groningen Studies in Cultural Change, 2, ed. G. J. Reinink & B.H. Stolt (Peeters, Leuven, 2002), 166-72.

10 III.13.20. Trans. in Theophylact Simocatta, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta*, ed. M. Whitby, M. Whitby, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986.

was writing during the reign of Heraclius, it is probable that he projected ideas drawn from the Heraclean propaganda backwards in time.[11] These ideas included an innovative concept, namely, that the dangers the troops were about to face would lead them to eternal life.

Heraclius' invocation of soldiers' sacrifice in the name of God has almost no antecedents in late antique societies.[12] The liturgical ceremonies celebrated before a battle were designed to purify the soldiers' souls for the violence they were about to commit, and to allow them entrance to Paradise despite their perpetuation of violent actions.[13] These practices reflect pacifistic trends in Eastern Christian orthodoxy. The epitome of this anti-militaristic attitude is Saint Basil of Caesarea, who prescribed abstention from communion for

11 See M. (Michael) Whitby, "*Deus nobiscum*: Christianity, warfare and morale in late antiquity", in *Modus Operandi: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Rickman*, eds. M. M. Austin, J. D. Harries and C. J. Smith, London, Institute of Classical Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London,1998, 191-208. M. (Mary) Whitby, "Defender of the Cross: Georgia of Pisidia on the Emperor Heraclius and his deputees", in *The Propaganda of Power. The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. M. Whitby, Leiden, Brill, 1998, 194; Stoyanov, *Defenders*, 43. As Olster observes: "Written about the late sixth century emperor Maurice, the work abounds with anachronisms, especially in the speeches. The address to the troops of the general Justinian before battle with the Persians, for example, almost literally echoes the martyrial rhetoric of war in George." D. M. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, 63. I do not agree, however, with Olster's identification of military martyrdom in the following passage in Theophylact's *History* that describes the sermon of Bishop Domitianus of Mitilene to the Byzantine soldiers who accompanied the expedition of Khosrow II against Bahrām Chōbin (V.4.6). Domitianus' admonishment: "Do not be robbed of wounds, lest as punishment you lose salvation," does not imply any promise of special reward for dying in combat, rather the loss of salvation. In his harangue, Domitianus encourages soldiers to sacrifice themselves to achieve, not eternal life, but eternal glory: "There is nothing sweeter than death in war, for if there is no advantage in growing old and being struck down by wasting disease, assuredly it is more appropriate for you heroes to die in the battle-line while you are young, reaping glory for your tombs. For nature is unable to make fugitives immortal" (trans. Whitby & Whitby). As Leppin's observes: "Domitianus did not remind them of eternal life, but argued from the brevity of life. In regard to the *topoi* utilized, this speech was an anticipated funeral oration." H. Leppin, "Roman Identity in a Border Region: Evagrius and the Defence of the Roman Empire," in W. Pohl, C. Gantner, R. E. Payne (eds.), *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1100*, Farnham, Burlington, Ashgate, 2012, 255.

12 See P. Stephenson, "Religious Services," 29-31; Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius' Persian Campaigns," 40; Stoyanov, *Defenders*, 71-2. As Olster remarks about Heraclius' speeches: "Certainly heroic self-sacrifice in deference to a god's command frequently occurs in classical history, but such military martyrdom *on the field of battle* [Olster's emphasis] was quite alien to the traditions of Christian military sainthood." Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 70, n. 126.

13 See Stephenson, "Religious Services", 28.

a period of three years for soldiers who had killed other men during battle.[14] While other Church Fathers may have been more indulgent (and cooperative with imperial needs), the belief in a heavenly reward for military activities probably would have appeared nonsensical to most Byzantines.

A literary element that merits special attention is the reference in Heraclius' second harangue to the crown of martyrdom. Soldiers are encouraged to expect reward if they die on the battlefield and this reward apparently coincides with the status of martyr. This concept was arguably a revolutionary innovation. Previously the martyr had been a passive figure slain by an unfaithful enemy, rather than a soldier engaged in a fight to impose (or to avenge) the true faith. At the same time, the figure of a martyred soldier could raise theological complications. Consider, for example, the Christian reception of the story of the Maccabees. The figure of Judah Maccabee, in particular, was problematic because his status as a warrior did not correspond to the paradigmatic image of the martyr. As Smith observes, "other Maccabean 'martyrs' are mentioned in Christian martyr acts and their cult was regularly promoted by Christian exegetes from late antiquity. Judah, however, is never regarded as one of these martyrs. From both a Jewish and a Christian perspective, the Maccabean martyrs were not the warriors who were killed while revolting against Seleucid rule, but rather the non-combatants who were killed for refusing to consume pork."[15] In the enormous corpus of early Christian martyr acts, there is only one text, namely the *Martyrdom of Simeon bar Ṣabbāʿē*, that appears to associate the figure of a Christian martyr with that of Judah Maccabee (without, of course, attributing to the former any violent act).[16] The otherwise regular exclusion of Judah from the list of the Maccabean martyrs suggests that Christians were not comfortable with the concept of a martyr warrior.[17]

14 On Saint Basil's prescription and its legacy in Eastern Christianity, see ibid., 28; Stoyanov, *Defenders*, 28; I. Stouraitis, "Jihād and Crusade: Byzantine positions towards the notions of "holy war", *Byzantina Symmeikta* 21 (2011), 54-5; A. Laiou, "The Just War of Eastern Christians and the Holy War of the Crusaders", in *The Ethics of War: Shared Problems in Different Traditions*, ed. R. Sorabji, D. Rodin (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006), 34.

15 K. Smith, "Constantine and Judah the Maccabee: History and Memory in the Acts of the Persian Martyrs." *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 12 (2012), 25.

16 See ibid., 22-6.

17 It should be noted that a clear distinction between the figures of the martyrs and of the warriors is already present in the *Books of the Maccabees*. See R. D. Young, "The 'Woman with the Soul of Abraham': Traditions about the Mother of the Maccabean Martyrs," in A.-J. Levine (ed.), "Women Like This": New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 69; D. A. de Silva, *4 Maccabees*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, 24; K. Smith, "Constantine and Judah the Maccabee," 25-6.

Exceptionally, the Armenians, due to their location on the limes of the Persian Empire, had developed the idea of sacred combat and heavenly reward for soldiers before the time of Heraclius. Mentions of martyrdom earned on the battlefield occur several times in the *The History of Łazar P'arpec'i*, which describes events around 450 CE.[18] Here, Armenian soldiers are said to have deliberately sought death in the battle of Avarayr – fought against a Sasanian army in 451 CE – in order to achieve the status of martyr.[19] Exhortations to self-sacrifice on the battlefield and to obtain eternal life in return were reportedly formulated on the eve of that battle. According to the *History*, the priest (and soon-to-be martyr) Łewond addressed the high-ranking Armenian nobles as follows:

> Knowing that the end of this life [comes] sooner or later, he said, they [i.e., the Christian martyrs] chose to gain eternal life. Some by torture and death, some by fasts and sleeping on the ground, others by caring for the poor and strangers, they unknowingly became worthy to receive the angels. Others again, made famous by good government and just judgment, became God's elect. For a martyr's fate does not befall everyone, but on appropriate occasions [one attains it], as divine providence bestows. Those who acquire it are obliged to purchase at a just price what passes not away in exchange for this transitory [world], and eternal blessings for this corruptible [world]. Now you who have been preserved for this great honorable cup, hasten to become worthy of attaining in [heavenly] light the portion of the inheritance of the saints, whose excellence the psalmist sings: "Excellent before the Lord is the death of his saints" [Ps. 115:15].[20]

After hearing Łewond's words, Vardan Mamikonian (d. 451 CE), leader of the Armenian army, reportedly replied:

18 Łazar P'arpec'i, *The history of Łazar P'arpec'i*, trans. Robert W. Thomson, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1991.

19 "On the Friday of the feast of the Pentecost the Armenian forces arrived near the spot and found the Persian army quite unprepared. Had they wished, they could have caused especial damage to the loose ranks of those lazy [soldiers]; but they let them be and held off for that day. For those who had set their desires on martyrdom from then on had not considered victory in order to see the perpetual destruction of the damned, but they were always and continuously anxious to reach the goal of the call and of the desired martyrdom." Ibid. 112.

20 Ibid. 113-4.

> Let us make haste to reach the marriage of Christ and his inviting messengers, the band of holy apostles, and the banquet of Christ, who opening the gate of the kingdom waits to receive everyone and make them joyful. Its happiness is eternal, unfading, and unending. Let us hasten without delay, and let no one be found like Judas who was rejected from the apostolic band – as tonight you have seen [some] cowards who ran after Satan. But I receive with eagerness the cup which I have desired since long ago; and in accordance with the saying I cry: "I shall receive the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord" [Ps. 115:13].[21]

The History of Łazar P'arpec'i then describes the Armenians' defeat at Avarayr and the death of Vardan. Noticeably, Vardan and eight other Armenian nobles who died on the battlefield are described as "those who in the hour of that blessed and heavenly summons became worthy to be martyred."[22] The author affirms that "the number of martyrs who were crowned on the battlefield with the great nobles was two hundred and seventy-six."[23] Clearly, in the eyes of the Armenian historian the conceptual boundary between the martyr and the soldier had vanished. The conflation between the two figures is evident in his description of Vardan's nephew and successor Vahan Mamikonian (d. between 503 and 510 CE), who during the battle of Akesga (483 CE) reportedly told the Arminian noble Narseh Kamsarakan: "Make haste, Narseh, to find a lance and return quickly. For we shall never find a more propitious moment for such an exchange – of death for immortality, this temporal existence for eternity, and this corruptible life for incorruptible life. Hurry, for we shall not remain deathless. Beware, lest missing this renowned and glorious end, we depart this life by an ignoble and insignificant death."[24] On that same occasion, Vahan's brother, Vasak, is also said to have died on the battlefield as a martyr.[25]

As witnessed by Łazar's report, the expectation to obtain martyrdom on the battlefield had been common in the Armenian martial tradition since the 5th century CE.[26] Otherwise, however, the idea that death in combat would be rewarded in the afterlife is never mentioned by sources prior to the reign of Heraclius. Before the 7th century, the concept of military martyrdom appears to have been unique to Armenian society. This peculiarity, however,

21 Ibid 114-5.
22 Ibid. 116.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid. 191-2.
25 Ibid.
26 Further references to this concept of martyrdom occur in the works of other Armenian writers of that period, namely Ełišē and the anonymous author of the work entitled *The Epic Histories* (*Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk*).

helps to explain why the idea of military martyrdom made its appearance in the Byzantine army under the leadership of Heraclius. Indeed, the emperor's possible Armenian lineage may explain how he came to be acquainted with a concept that was specific to Armenian society.[27] Equally relevant is the strong component of Armenian soldiers in the contingent of Transcaucasian forces gathered by Heraclius on the eve of his Persian campaign.[28] The high number of Armenians in the emperor's army may have motivated him to use religious notions with which the troops were accustomed. The Armenian warriors fighting under Heraclius could be inspired by the idea of a sacred struggle on the field of battle and the promise of an afterlife. As Howard-Johnston observes: "Heraclius' message was well attuned to the times and to one particular section of his audience, the Armenian auxiliaries. For such ideas had been current in Armenia since the middle of the fifth century."[29]

The context in which the emperor delivered his harangues helps to elucidate the rationale behind his adoption of the concept of military martyrdom. Heraclius' promises of martyrdom for dying in battle were largely meant as exhortations to troops who were already familiar with a similar idea. His calls for military martyrdom ostensibly addressed the specific context of his army and were not meant as a challenge to the canonical idea of martyrdom accepted by most Christians. For this reason, the emperor did not have to deal with the theological difficulties that might be raised by the figure of the martyred soldier. As far as we know, Heraclius and his entourage never sought the support of the Christian clergy to canonize a spiritual reward for soldiers who lost their life during combat.[30] At the same time, imperial propagandists did not seek to popularize on a large scale the emperor's promises of military martyrdom, as is indicated by the fact that this concept had a weak legacy. In later Byzantine historical chronicles, we find only small number of reports about martyrdom on the battlefield.[31] In the following centuries, only a handful of sources mention spiritual rewards for troops that engage in combat.[32]

---

27 See, Stoyanov. *Defenders*, 72, n. 196.

28 Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius' Persian Campaigns," 38.

29 Ibid. 40.

30 As Kaegi observes about the emperor's promotion of religious fervor: "it is Heraclius and his panegyrists, not the Patriarch or bishops, who are creating any crusade-like features and whipping up religious enthusiasm." W. Kaegi, *Heraclius: Emperor of Byzantium*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 126.

31 After the rise of Islam, Eastern Christians developed a new cult for soldiers killed in captivity after refusing to abjure Christianity. However, this cult adhered to earlier paradigms of martyrdom, according to which a believer does not repudiate his faith in order to save his life. See Stephenson, "Religious Services", 31-5.

32 See, ibid., 31-9; Stouraitis, "'Just War' and 'Holy War,'" 243-4.

The military treatise *Tactica*, composed (or sponsored by) emperor Leo VI (r. 886-912), subscribes to the general duty of consoling "those soldiers wounded in it [i.e., battle] and to honor those who fell in the battle with burial, and to consider them perpetually blessed, since they did not esteem their own lives above their faith and their brothers."[33] The text makes no mention of martyrdom. However, this idea must have been current in that historical period, for it appears in the writings of Leo's VI son and successor, Constantine VII Porphyrogenetus (r. 945-959). Constantine seems to have adopted this father's rhetoric when, on the eve of a battle, he told his soldiers: "We will kiss your bodies wounded for the sake of Christ in veneration as the limbs of martyrs."[34] Thus, both Leo VI and Constantine VII mention possible spiritual rewards for soldiers who die in battle and, at least in the case of Constantine, a comparison is made between soldiers and martyrs. It should be noted that both emperors deprecate the (conceptually similar) Islamic idea of martyrdom elsewhere in their writings.[35] The same perplexing situation may be extended to Theophanes, who reports Heraclius' speeches on military martyrdom and, at the same time, condemns the Islamic idea.[36] How to explain these different views of post-mortem reward obtained on the battlefield?

Byzantine authors may have understood the promises made to the troops differently from how they understood the Islamic doctrine of martyrdom. Theophanes did not stigmatize Heraclius' promise of martyrdom because he did not regard it as an attempt to establish a doctrine, but rather as an exhortation to the troops. Much the same may be said about Leo VI and his son Constantine VII. As in Heraclius' speeches, their words about military martyrdom are best understood as part of the harangue that a general, or an emperor, might address to his army on the eve of a battle. Neither Leo VI's *Tactica* nor the writings of his son Constantine VII contains any attempt to articulate a specific doctrine about the status of dead soldiers. For Byzantine emperors, the idea of military martyrdom was merely a rhetorical device adopted to arouse the spirit of the troops. What is certain is that this idea never became a point

33 Trans. in Stephenson, "Religious Services for Byzantine Soldiers", 36. As Stephenson notes about this passage, "those who die in battle should be considered perpetually blessed, *makarios*, a term used most frequently in patristic writings for 'martyr.'" Ibid.

34 Ibid., 37.

35 Stouraitis, "'Just War' and 'Holy War,'" 246-7. Leo VI and Constantine VII here follow the common hostile attitude to the Islamic idea of martyrdom adopted by many Byzantine authors. Byzantine sources often label as nonsensical the idea that God will reward those who lose their life while spreading their religion with the sword. See, ibid., 242; id., "Jihād and Crusade," 14-5.

36 Ibid.

of doctrine sanctioned by ecclesiastic authorities. The opposite is the case, as the clergy refused to formalize the cult of the martyred soldier.

According to Ioannes Scylitzes (second half of the 11th century), the emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963-969) urged upon the Patriarch of Constantinople, Polyeuctus (956-970), that "those who fell in battle be honored equally with the holy martyrs and be celebrated with hymns and feast days."[37] Polyeuctus, however, rejected the emperor's request. Referring to Basil of Caesarea, the patriarch answered: "How is it possible to number among the martyrs those who fell in battle, whom Basil the Great excluded from the sanctified elements for three years since their hands were unclean?"[38] Polyeuctus' response indicates that the idea of a martyred soldier was alien to most Byzantines. Moreover, the fact that in the 10th century the emperor needed to ask the patriarch to celebrate dead soldiers as martyrs confirms that neither Heraclius nor his successors sought to formalize their promises of post-mortem reward for soldiers.

Two points of interest have so far emerged from the analysis of the concept of military martyrdom promulgated by Heraclius. First, this idea has almost no antecedent in late antique society. Second, no attempt was made to either canonize or popularize on a large scale this point of Heraclius' propaganda. These observations lead us to another important consideration: During the reign of Heraclius the concept of military martyrdom must have been limited to a narrow circle of persons. The number of individuals who were familiar with this idea must have been small and mostly restricted to the circle of persons who were actively involved in military activities. The fact that the clergy were not actively involved and that there were no special festivities to celebrate the martyred soldiers explains why the idea of military martyrdom did not achieve widespread popularity. For this reason, it is surprising that very similar concepts are recorded in an Arabic document composed in the very same historical period, that is, the Qur'ān.

3 Reward for Dying in Battle in the Qur'ān

Possible references to rewards for death in battle in the Qur'ān can be found in six passages:

> **Q 2:154.** And say not of those slain in God's way, "They are dead;" rather they are living, but you are not aware.

37 John Skylitzes, *Synopsis historion*, ed. J. Thurn, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1973, 274-75.
38 Stouraitis, "'Just War' and 'Holy War,'" 243-4.

Q 3:169-171. Count not those who were slain in God's way as dead, but rather living with their Lord, by Him provided, rejoicing in the bounty that God has given them, and joyful in those who remain behind and have not joined them, because no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow, joyful in blessing and bounty from God, and that God leaves not to waste the wage of the believers.

Q 3:195. And their Lord answers them: "I waste not the labour of any that labours among you, be you male or female – the one of you is as the other. And those who emigrated, and were expelled from their habitations, those who suffered hurt in My way, and fought, and were slain – them I shall surely acquit of their evil deeds, and I shall admit them to gardens underneath which rivers flow." A reward from God! And God with Him is the fairest reward.

Q 4:74. So let them fight in the way of God who sell the present life for the world to come; and whosoever fights in the way of God and is slain, or conquers, We shall bring him a mighty wage.

Q 9:111. God has bought from the believers their selves and their possessions against the gift of Paradise; they fight in the way of God; they kill, and are killed; that is a promise binding upon God in the Torah, and the Gospel, and the Koran; and who fulfills his covenant truer than God? So rejoice in the bargain you have made with Him; that is the mighty triumph.

Q 47:4-6. When you meet the unbelievers, smite their necks, then, when you have made wide slaughter among them, tie fast the bonds; then set them free, either by grace or ransom, till the war lays down its loads. So it shall be; and if God had willed, He would have avenged Himself upon them; but that He may try some of you by means of others. And those who are slain in the way of God, He will not send their works astray. He will guide them, and dispose their minds aright, and He will admit them to Paradise, that He has made known to them.[39]

In only one case is divine reward unambiguously promised to those who engage in military activities. This is Q 9:111, which unequivocally refers to those who kill and are killed (*fa-yaqtulūna wa-yuqtalūna*) while fighting on God's path. Further references to compensation for death in battle may be derived from the contextual evidence in two more passages. In Q 47:4-6 the encouragement to slaughter the unbelievers suggests that the victims are not merely those who are killed in God's path, but also those who actively engage in

39 Arberry's translation.

fight. Much the same may be said about Q 4:74. Those who "sell the life of this world for the Hereafter" and the person "who fights in the cause of God and is killed or achieves victory" reasonably may be identified as warriors, since the initial exhortation to "fight in the cause of God" may hardly be taken to refer to something other than a military activity. Similarly, Q 3:195 probably describes a situation in which fighters who are killed are accordingly rewarded, or so it would appear from the reference to those who "fought and were slain" (*fa-qātalū wa-qutilū*). Interestingly, in this case the Qurʾān does not seem to make any distinction in terms of eschatological reward between those who are victims of religious violence and those who fight back against the aggressors. Q 2:154 and Q 3:169-171 are more problematic. It is difficult to determine whether "those who are killed on God's path" mentioned in these verses are fighters or victims of religious violence. While these verses are often considered to imply reward for dead warriors, it may be argued that they refer to a "conventional" form of martyrdom that celebrates those who are killed because of their faith. It may very well be that this was the original meaning of these two verses and that only later did they come to be read through the prism of the Islamic doctrine of the fighting martyr.[40]

Be that as it may be, it is striking how few are the Qurʾān's references to possible remuneration for dying in combat. The idea that dead warriors are rewarded with eschatological privileges occurs six times in the entire text (if we follow a maximalist interpretation). Interestingly, this situation seems to have persisted into the first decades AH, as evidenced by early Islamic graffiti that report calls of fighting and martyrdom.[41] As Lindstedt has pointed out, these graffiti were written between 690 CE and 720 CE, at least half a century after the emergence of the Islamic community. Lindstedt postulates that "the Qurʾānic text did not disseminate much as a commonly recited, heard, read, or, at least, written text before the 690s. During this and the next decades, Arabic monumental inscriptions and graffiti begin to contain rather many Qurʾānic quotations."[42] This hypothesis, however, does not take account of a very im-

40 This possible reading is supported by the fact that in these verses the Qurʾān seems to follow the phraseology about martyrs current among Syriac Christians. Specifically, the idea that those slaughtered on God's path are not dead but living with their Lord recalls the following proclamation by Mar Ishai (6th c. CE): "People believed that they are dead. But their death killed their sin and they are living in the presence of God." See T. Andrae, *Les origines de l'islam et le christianisme*, Paris, Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient Adrien Maisonneuve – Jean Maisonneuve, 168; G. S. Reynolds, *The Qurʾān and Its Biblical Subtext*, London, Routledge, 2010, 166. The notion of military martyrdom was not current in Syriac Christianity in the 7th century.

41 As previously mentioned, the word *šahīd* clearly signifies "martyr" in these inscriptions.

42 I. Lindstedt, "Religious warfare and martyrdom."

portant factor: none of the extant epigraphic formulae about martyrdom is a Qurʾānic quotation. Thus, the appearance of graffiti calling for self-sacrifice in combat is not necessarily connected to direct knowledge of relevant Qurʾānic passages.

The overall situation is perplexing. One would expect that the concept of eschatological compensation for dying in battle would be well rooted in a community involved in military activities and reportedly moved by strong religious fervor. However, the very limited references to this idea in the Qurʾān and its relatively late appearance in early material evidence points to a different scenario. A plausible explanation is that the idea of spiritual reward for fighters entered the Qurʾānic corpus at a late stage and that it did not have an immediate impact on the community. Although it is notoriously difficult to establish a solid chronology of the Qurʾān, it is reasonable to assume that the idea of divine reward for dying in battle was adopted and promoted at the time of the territorial expansion of the early Islamic community. Moreover, there are good reasons to think that the concept of remuneration for dead soldiers was not immediately adopted by the early believers, nor was it unanimously accepted by members of the community. Indeed, the Qurʾān preserves evidence of an ongoing debate on the legitimacy of violence. To illustrate this point, it will be useful to briefly discuss the general subject of warfare and violence in the Qurʾān

The topic is notoriously complex. The text manifests different and conflicting attitudes about how to deal with those who oppose its message. Some passages advocate nonmilitant views, while others advocate the opposite. Several verses articulate a response to opponents (e.g., Q 2:109, 5:13, 6:106, 15:94, 29:46, 50:39), while others openly incite violence (e.g., Q 2:193, 8:39, 9:5, 9:29, 9:73, 9:123, 66:9). The tone of the Qurʾān shifts dramatically from "invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best" (Q 16:125), to "kill them wherever you overtake them and expel them from wherever they have expelled you" (Q 2:191). Between the two poles of non-militancy and militancy, we find a series of passages supporting intermediate positions in which fighting is allowed, albeit with restrictions (e.g., Q 2:190, 2:194, 9:36, 22:39-40).

Qurʾān exegetes harmonize these conflicting statements about violence by invoking the model of progressive revelation. According to this model, the different views expressed in the Qurʾān reflect changes in the situation of Muḥammad's community during his career as a prophet. The evolving political situation in Mecca, first, and in Medina, later, was accompanied by a progressive extension of the need to engage in militant activities. Contradictory verses are thus explained through the theory of abrogation, according to which

a "more recent" verse abrogates an "older" verse. Unfortunately, these hermeneutical explanations suffer from a major methodological handicap: they rely on arguments relating to the chronology of the Qur'ānic corpus that also raise several complications.[43] Moreover, as Reuven Firestone has observed, in commentaries "we find tremendous disagreement over what occasions inspired the major war verses, when they occurred, and to what or whom they refer. This decided lack of agreement calls into question the classic argument of divinely guided evolution and reveals its origin as a theoretical solution to the problem of Qur'ānic contradiction."[44]

In contrast to a progressive model, Firestone proposes that "the conflicting verses of revelation articulate the view of different factions existing simultaneously within the early Muslim community of Muḥammad's day and, perhaps, continuing for a period after his death."[45] The internal evidence of the Qur'ān suggests that within the Qur'ān's community(/ies) there was a certain reluctance to fight, with some elements openly opposing militant trends. The Qur'ān engages with these opponents and exhorts them to take up arms: "Fighting has been enjoined upon you while it is hateful to you" (Q 2:216). "What is the matter with you that you fight not in the cause of God"? (Q 4:75). Interestingly, the Qur'ān provides a glimpse of the social tensions that lay behind this ideological struggle. In some verses, the call to battle is specifically addressed to nomads (*aʿrāb*), who are otherwise depicted as not keen to fight (esp. Q 48:11, 16; cf. Q 9:90, 120; 33:20).[46] These passages point to a situation in which an urban community confronted elements belonging to the surrounding nomadic environment.

Firestone suggests that the different Qur'ānic passages on warfare reflect the transition from pre-Islamic to Islamic values, that is, a paradigm shift, in which "religious affiliation replaced kinship affiliation as the religious community replaced the tribe."[47] The call to fight "in God's path" took time to crystalize among people who did not expect a spiritual reward for warfare. It is also possible that the different attitudes toward warfare documented in the Qur'ān are connected to the common late antique debate about how to reconcile violence

43 In most cases the chronologies used by Muslim exegetes are not based on historical data about Muḥammad's preaching, but rather on speculations about the text itself. See A. Rippin, "The Exegetical Genre *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*: A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey," *BSOAS* 48 (1985), 1-15.

44 R. Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, 51.

45 Ibid., 64-65.

46 In many passages nomads are also blamed for their hypocrisy (Q 9:97-98, 101; 49:14).

47 Firestone, *Jihad*, 91.

and religious piety. The Qur'ānic passages that advocate against militancy may reflect pacifistic trends current in late antique societies.

Be that as it may be, communal disagreements over fighting are the background against which to read the Qur'ānic concept of eschatological reward for dead soldiers. Those passages that promise compensation for dying on the battlefield appear to be in conversation with those reporting the voices of members of the community who were reluctant to take up arms. The verses on reward for self-sacrifice in battle respond to the objections of these dissidents – in the form in which they are (polemically) presented. The statements in Q 2:154 and 3:169, i.e., that those who are killed in the way of God are not dead but alive,[48] as well as the promise in Q 3:195 and 47:4-6 that their deeds will not be wasted but will grant them admission to Paradise, are related to the Qur'ān's accusation against those who avoid the battlefield or flee from it on account of fear of death (Q 3:156, 167-168; 4:72, 77; 9:38; 33:16). Similarly, the trade metaphors used in the verses about self-sacrifice, i.e, receiving a bounty from God (Q 3:170-171), exchanging this life for the one to come (4:74), or selling life to God in return for the Garden (Q 9:111),[49] promote the paradigm of a virtuous choice that opposes preference for the present world over the Hereafter. In the Qur'ānic discourse, the promise of a reward for dying while fighting for God is used to exhort the believers to fight, and it represents an alternative to the threat of divine punishment for not engaging in battle (Q 9:39).

The promulgation of a militant notion like the promise of reward in the afterlife for dying in battle was arguably related to the ongoing debate about the legitimacy of calls for violence among the early community of believers. It is easy to imagine that such a concept would have provided a useful means

48 On the assumption that these verses refer to people engaged in combat (see above).

49 According to Q 9:111, access to the Garden for those who are killed on God's path was already guaranteed by God "in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'ān." This assertion points to the need for a solid scriptural basis for the promise of spiritual reward for dead fighters. Here the Qur'ān may be alluding to earlier "revelations." More interesting is the use of biblical antecedents. In fact, neither the Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament contains any mention of a heavenly reward for dead fighters. Nevertheless, in the late antique world, biblical passages were commonly interpreted in a militaristic way. For instance, Byzantine religious militarism rests on tropes derived from the war narratives in the Hebrew Bible. At the same time, a number of selected New Testament passages marked by military images may be read through the prism of military ideology (see Stoyanov, "Apocalypticizing warfare: from political theology to imperial eschatology in seventh- to early eighth-century Byzantium," in *The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition. A Comparative Perspective*, ed. K. B. Bardakjian, S. La Porta (Leiden, Brill, 2014), 380-1, 385, 389. Q 9:111 may thus reflect the common practice of using scriptural evidence to legitimize violence. On possible connections to the rhetoric about military martyrdom current among Armenians, see below.

to unify a divided community. However, "reconciliation" over this point was not achieved over night. As Asma Afsaruddin has shown, Islamic sources frequently refer to non-militant interpretations of martyrdom: "Several *ḥadīth*s and non-prophetic reports specifically challenge those who would emphasize dying on the battlefield as the primary understanding of martyrdom."[50] These dissenting interpretations sought to undermine the glorification of militancy by the Umayyads and to claim, by contrast, the centrality of non-militant religious practices. In general, it appears that "the cult of the military *jihād* and martyrdom that was being promoted during the Umayyad period did not go unchallenged, nor was it inexorable or fully formed during the first two centuries of Islam."[51] Intriguingly, this situation recalls the above-observed tensions between religious and political authorities in the Byzantine world at the time of the dispute between emperor Nikephoros and patriarch Polyeuctus. Unlike what happened in the Byzantine world, however, the Umayyads eventually prevailed and were able to impose their views – as suggested by the fact that reports about non-militant interpretations of *jihād* and martyrdom progressively disappear from the writings of later authors. The Umayyads' success in overcoming the opposition of dissenting religious authorities and in establishing a cult of dead soldiers may explain why the idea of military martyrdom caught on in the Islamic community after having been rejected in the Byzantine Empire.

4 Heraclius' Concept of Military Martyrdom and the Qur'ān's Promise of Reward for Death in Combat

Are the Qur'ānic promises of reward for dying in battle connected to the idea of military martyrdom promoted by Heraclius during the conflict against the Sasanians? The appearance of the idea of military martyrdom among Arabs in the first half of the 7th century is surely striking. Are these simultaneous manifestations of religious and military zeal perhaps connected to each other? One wonders if concepts designed to serve Byzantium's political agenda were absorbed by the new religious community and then transformed for its own interests.

50 A. Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihād and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2013, 126.

51 Ibid., 284-5. Interestingly, it was Hijazi and, to a lesser degree, Kufan and Basran scholars, who advocated a non-militant interpretation of martyrdom against the Syrian Umayyads (ibid., 118-21).

There is evidence that Heraclius' propagandists circulated their literary productions in the environment in which parts of the Qurʾānic corpus originated. A first example is that of the so-called *Syriac Alexander Legend*. This is a Syriac apocalypse about Alexander that predicts the glorious future of the Byzantine Empire. The *Legend* was widely diffused during Heraclius' reign and it inspired other apocalyptic works. The authors who used it as a source include the author of the pericope on Ḏū-l-Qarnayn at vv. 83-102 of sūrat al-Kahf (Q 18), which is clearly a retelling of the story found in the *Legend*.[52] A second example is vv. 2-7 of sūrat al-Rūm (Q 30), which report on the Romans' (*al-rūm*) involvement in a conflict against an unnamed enemy and predict its eventual outcome. The passage refers to the 7th c. conflict between Byzantines and Sasanians. In a recent study, I have shown that the prophecy about the Rūm closely resembles prophecies about the war that circulated in the Middle East in the first half of the 7th century.[53] Specifically, Q 30:2-7 is connected to pseudo-prophetical materials produced by imperial propagandists and spread in the years immediately following the end of the conflict with the Persian enemy.

Q 18:83-102 and 30:2-7 suggest that Byzantine propaganda circulated among the members of the early Islamic movement. In support of this position it should be noted that Byzantine propaganda seems to have had an impact on early Muslim authorities. The actions reportedly performed by Muʿāwiya in Jerusalem at the moment of his election as caliph appear to have been inspired by Heraclius' triumphal entry into the city in 630.[54] More generally, in its formative period the Islamic movement seems to have shared the widespread apocalyptic anxieties that characterized the 7th century. Indeed, ideas similar to that of Byzantium's divinely appointed imperialism help to explain early Islamic territorial expansions.[55] Some members of the nascent commu-

52 On the common points between the two texts, see now K. van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qurʾān 18:83-102," in *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context*, ed. Reynolds, 175-203; T. Tesei, "The prophecy of Ḏū-l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83-102) and the Origins of the Qurʾānic Corpus," in *Miscellanea Arabica*, Nuova Sapienza Orientale 5, ed. A. Arioli (Ariccia, Aracne, 2013-2014), 273-90.

53 T. Tesei, "The Romans will win!" A Qurʾānic prophecy (Q 30:2-7) in light of 7th c. political eschatology," *Der Islam* 2018; 95 (1): 1-29.

54 See O. Heilo, *Eastern Rome and the Rise of Islam: History and Prophecy*, London and New York, Routledge, 2015, 40; A. Marsham, "The Architecture of Allegiance in Early Islamic Late Antiquity: The Accession of Muʿawiya in Jerusalem, *ca.* 661 CE," in *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. A. Beihammer, S. Constantinou, M. Parani (Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2013), 90, 102, 107.

55 Shoemaker, "The Reign of God Has Come," 557; id., *The Apocalypse of Empire: Imperial Eschatology in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, esp. chs. 5&6.

nity may have perceived the wars of expansion as part of an eschatological process. It is difficult to determine the degree to which the political leaders of the new movement formulated or deliberately encouraged a chiliastic agenda. However, whatever "official political line" was followed by the early Muslim leaders, ideas closely related to Byzantine eschatological militarism appear to have had a considerable impact on the new community.

Thus, both Qur'ānic and post-Qur'ānic evidence points to the impact of Byzantine propaganda on the early Muslim community. And the fact that other Qur'ānic passages mentioned above draw upon the literary production of Heraclius' propagandists points to the transmission of these ideas from Byzantium to the environment in which the Qur'ān emerged. In this case, it seems to me that scholars should seriously consider the possibility that the Qur'ān's promises of reward for dying in combat are dependent upon Heraclius' war propaganda. One may object that the Qur'ānic and the Byzantine concepts are independent manifestations of similar attempts to reconcile warfare and religion.[56] However, it should be recalled that the ideas advocated by the Qur'ān and by Byzantine propaganda are almost unprecedented and that the belief in a heavenly reward for dying on the battlefield has almost no antecedents in late antique cultures. The sudden appearance of an almost unprecedented concept in the 7th century in both Heraclius' sermons and in the Qur'ān is hardly coincidental. A direct connection between the two phenomena appears to be a more likely explanation.

Of course, one may object that the concept of military martyrdom is documented in Armenian society since the second half of the 5th century. As observed, however, Armenian martyrdom is an exceptional case in late antique culture. It is doubtful (and undocumented in the sources) that their distinctive views of death in battle ever had an impact on a broader context prior to the 7th century. Their militaristic understanding of sacred combat and of martyrdom found its way into Byzantine military circles only at the time of Heraclius. The emperor's utilitarian adoption of these ideas to address his troops temporarily gave the concept of military martyrdom a higher (albeit limited) visibility. This is the only plausible scenario in which the peculiarities of the Armenian sacralization of warfare could come to be known by other communities in marginal areas of the Byzantine world.

56 This is the position advocated by Nicolai Sinai, who, while highlighting the similarity between Heraclius' speeches, as reported by Theophanes, and the Qur'ānic passages on military martyrdom, rejects any direct connection. N. Sinai, *The Qur'ān: A Historical-Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 195.

It is noticeable that specific elements used in *The History of Łazar P'arpec'i* to describe martyrdom on the battlefield also occur in the Qur'ān. The idea that God "buys" the lives of those who die in battle in exchange for Paradise (Q 4:74; 9:111) recalls Vahan Mamikonian's urge to "trade" the present life for the one to come, as described by Łazar.[57] The concept expressed in Q 9:111: that reward for dying in battle is promised in previous Scriptures, parallels Łazar's attempt to find scriptural references to military martyrdom (with specific quotations from Ps 115). Noticeably, images similar to those used by Łazar also occur in Theophylact Simocatta's passage about general Justinian's harangue which, as we have seen, was informed by Heraclius' war propaganda. Specifically, the concept anachronistically attributed to Justinian that angels recruit soldiers and record the souls of those who die in combat is based on the same imagery used by Łazar to depict Vahan Mamikonian's farewell remarks to his soon-to-be-martyred brother Vasak: "Today he has been taken from me and from this abominable life, and transposed to that army of angels whose troops have this appearance and form."[58] Of course, the parallels between the three texts are based on *topoi* and images that were common in late antique religious discourse. Yet, it is significant that in all three writings these general literary features are associated with the specific, albeit *very uncommon*, idea of heavenly reward for dying in battle. This suggests that we are in the presence of a specific rhetoric of self-sacrifice in battle that must have been circulating in Armenian society at least since the time when Łazar was writing (i.e., second half of the 5th century) and that was still current among Heraclius' Armenian soldiers. Indeed, Theophylact's awareness of this rhetoric indicates that, besides the few words reported by George of Pisidia and transmitted by Theophanes, Heraclius adopted the wider corpus of rhetorical elements associated with the idea of military martyrdom. In this case, the similarities between the Qur'ān and *The History of Łazar P'arpec'i* may be explained by their common reference to the rhetoric of death in holy combat elaborated in Armenian society. This rhetoric was picked up by the Qur'ān through the mediation of Heraclius' war propaganda.

Unlike the Armenian understanding of immolation in battle adopted by Heraclius, the Qur'ān does not associate its promise of reward for dead fighters with the status of martyr. However, it should be observed that specific mentions

57 See the passage from Łazar's *History* quoted above.

58 *The history of Łazar P'arpec'i*, 191. When he mentions the appearance and the form of the angels, Vahan is referring to the light that surrounds his brother before the battle and that signals his destiny to become a martyr. The same *topos* is used elsewhere in *The History* to prefigure the martyrdom of Łewond. Ibid., 113.

of martyrdom are not made in Heraclius' first harangue or in Theophylact Simocatta's *History*. As observed, the focus of the emperor's propaganda was on the idea of reward for dying in battle, not on martyrdom, and this specific focus on reward seems to be reflected in the sources. The fact that the Qur'ān does not use a term for martyr in the relevant passages may relate to this situation, as well as to the fact that the Qur'ān does not seem to have a specific term to designate martyrs.

In light of these considerations, it seems more plausible that the propaganda spread by Heraclius about military martyrdom inspired the Qur'ānic promise of spiritual reward for dying in battle than that the same creed emerged independently in two different contexts. This is the hypothesis that yields the most plausible historical explanation for the simultaneous appearance of a similar concept in two different contexts. However, it remains to determine how this specific idea may have been transmitted to the early Islamic community. In fact, as noted, the promise of reward for martyred soldiers probably did not circulate outside of the Heraclius' army. There would not have been many persons in the Byzantine sphere who were familiar with the innovative idea promoted by the emperor. How thus to explain its transmission to the environment in which the Qur'ān originated?

A first possibility is to postulate that the idea of military martyrdom was transmitted through commercial exchanges that brought members of the community of believers in contact with Byzantine soldiers. To substantiate this hypothesis, one may refer to Crone's study on the commerce of leather and other pastoralist goods, which traders from Western Central Arabia may have supplied to the Roman army.[59] These commercial exchanges would explain how a specific concept was transmitted from Byzantine military circles to a community purportedly located in the Hijazi area. This argument does not challenge the broad outlines of traditional transmitted knowledge about the genesis of the Qur'ān as a corpus of texts produced by a Hijazi community not yet engaged in a territorial expansion outside of the Arabian Peninsula. Following a traditional understanding of early Islamic history, the passages that promise (or possibly promise) reward for dead warriors are found in sūras assigned to the so-called Medinan period of the Qur'ān, that is, the part of the text that allegedly reflects Muḥammad's career after the migration to Yathrib in 622. One may thus argue that ideas similar to that of military martyrdom promoted by Heraclius circulated in the Qur'ān's environment during Muḥammad's lifetime (assuming that Muḥammad died in 632 or slightly thereafter). On a general

59 P. Crone, "Quraysh and the Roman Army: Making Sense of the Meccan Leather Trade," *BSOAS* 70.1 (2007), 63-88.

level, this first hypothesis may be related to scholarly attempts to extend the influence of the late antique world beyond the *limes arabicus* to explain continuities between the Qur'ān and literary traditions, legal practices, and customs of the communities of the late antique Middle East.[60]

Some scholars have offered a different explanation for this cultural continuity by moving, so-to-speak, the Qur'ān outside of its traditional Hijazi setting.[61] This view has not found favor in the academic community and most scholars (including myself) still prefer to identify Western Central Arabia as the original cradle of the Qur'ān's community. Be that as it may, I have recently argued that there are good reasons to think that *parts* of the Qur'ānic corpus were reformulated or, in some cases, composed anew, only at the time of the community's expansion in Byzantine and Sasanian provinces.[62] In this case, the Qur'ān would be a literary document that reflects not only Muḥammad's prophetic career in Central Western Arabia, but also the development of the community that recognized him as a leader during the first decades of its territorial expansion.

Against the background of this discussion there is, of course, the more general question about the composition and canonization of the Qur'ānic materials. The Islamic tradition transmits a number of diverse accounts about the "collection" of the Qur'ān. According to the most widely accepted account, the collection would have happened during the reign of the third caliph ʿUṯmān. Nevertheless, several divergent opinions are recorded and different illustrious personalities of the early Islāmic history (from Abū Bakr to ʿAbd al-Malik) are credited with main roles in the "collection" work.[63] Western scholars have advanced several different hypotheses without reaching any full consensus.[64]

60 On this scholarship, see R. Hoyland, "Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions," *History Compass* 5 (2007), 12.

61 Ibid., 11.

62 Tesei, "The Romans will win," 26.

63 A. L. de Prémare, *Les fondations de l'islam. Entre écriture et histoire*, Paris, Seuil, 2002, 285-300.

64 P. Casanova, *Mohammed et la fin du monde: étude critique sur l'Islam primitive*, Paris, P. Geuthner, 1911-24, 103-42; A. Mingana, "The Transmission of the Kur'ān", Journal of the Manchester Egyptian and Oriental Society 5 (1916), 25-47; J. Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977; J Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977 (2nd ed.: Amherst, NY, Prometheus, 2004), 20, 44, 50, 170-202; F. M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton, NJ, Darwin Press, 1998, 152-8; A. Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon: Zu Entstehung und Wiederauflösung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus," in S. Wild (ed.), *The Qur'ān as Text*, Brill, Leiden, 1996, 78 n. 24; id., "Structural, linguistic and literary features", in J. D. McAuliffe (ed.), *The*

Current views concerning the dating of the earliest Qur'ānic manuscripts seem to dismiss the hypothesis of a late canonization of the text advanced by some scholars. Even if the actual period to which the fragmentary manuscripts should be ascribed is unclear, there seems to be an increasing scholarly consensus that the corpus reached a stable or quasi-stable form around the middle of the 7th century – a position that I myself advocate.

Regrettably, the idea of a mid 7th c. redaction is often accompanied by the questionable assertion that no significant change could be made to the Qur'ānic materials in the period between the alleged date of Muḥammad's death in 632 CE and the moment when the redaction of the text would have occurred. Those who advocate this view consider this period of time too short to allow alterations to the (hypothetic) original corpus of Muḥammad's "revelations."[65] It is useful to recall, however, that in those few years Muḥammad's community underwent dramatic and very rapid changes. According to the sources, a small community from Western Central Arabia somehow achieved a hegemonic position in the Arabian Peninsula and later established its control over a large territory in former Byzantine and Sasanian provinces. During this process a large segment of the original community was removed from its original home and, during its territorial expansion, was numerically enlarged by the arrival of new members. As a result, the number of people who had had direct contact with the founder of the community dramatically decreased in a very short period of time. These are the perfect conditions for loss, dilution, or even distortion of historical memory. That in similar circumstances the transmission of Muḥammad's "revelation" could be secured by a solid oral tradition and be preserved from external contamination is not realistic. This view also implies that the community had determined what was Qur'ānic at an early stage, and that the knowledge of materials commonly recognized as Qur'ānic was so widespread that any attempt to introduce new materials could be easily unmasked.

Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 98-9; id., "Structure and the Emergence of Community", in A. Rippin (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2006, 143; C. F. Robinson, *'Abd al-Malik, Makers of the Muslim World*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2005, 102-4; Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet. The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginning of Islam*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 147-58; N. Sinai, "When did the consonantal skeleton of the Quran reach closure? Part I," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77.2 (2014), 273-292; id., "When did the consonantal skeleton of the Quran reach closure? Part II," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77.3 (2014), 509-521.

65 A. Neuwirth, "Zur Archäologie einer Heiligen Schrift. Überlegungen zum Koran vor seiner Kompilation," in: C. Burgmer (ed.), Streit um den Koran. Die Luxenberg-Debatte: Standpunkte und Hintergründe, Schiler, Berlin, 2007, 130; id., *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang*, Berlin, 2010, 250.

The actual situation, however, must have been far more complex. Soon after the beginning of the Arab territorial expansion, most members of the new community, especially the new members, probably had only a vague idea of the precepts of the charismatic, founding Prophet, and even less knowledge of the actual words he had spoken.

In sum, it is hard to believe that the conditions that characterized the early Islamic period did not influence the redaction of the Qur'ān, and that a corpus of prophetical speeches not yet committed to writing was not altered in such chaotic times. There are some passages in the Qur'ān whose relation to the time period before the first Arab expansions into Byzantine territory is questionable. This is the case of the already mentioned Q 18:83-102 and Q 30:2-7, which likely were composed after 628 and seem to refer to a political scenario outside of a local Arabian context. The narrative about the nativity of Jesus in Q 19:22-27 is another Qur'ānic passage that arguably is related to a geographical area outside of Western Central Arabia.[66] With these observations in mind, it is possible to formulate a second hypothesis to explain how the idea of *post-mortem* compensation for death on the battlefield may have been transmitted from the Byzantine army to the early Islamic community.

Both the Byzantines and Sasanians relied on alliances with Arab vassals. Byzantine sources report that Arab contingents fought on both sides of the battlefield during the 7th c. conflict.[67] It is plausible that Arab detachments enrolled in Heraclius' army were exposed to Byzantine propaganda. Like their Armenian comrades, Arab Christians in the Byzantine ranks would have been inspired by the trope of a holy war. If so, Christian Arab fighters would have had a direct knowledge of propaganda promoted by Heraclius, including that about military martyrdom. In the years immediately following the end of the conflict in 628, the relationship between the Arab fighters and the two world powers changed again, this time forever. As Hoyland observes: "These Arab allies of the empires, though they continued to fight for their imperial masters for a while, soon began to switch to the west Arabian coalition of Muḥammad and his successors."[68] The integration of Byzantium's former Arab allies into the community that would later redact the Qur'ān would have been of extreme importance for the question addressed here. It is easy to imagine that these

66 See S. Shoemaker, "Christmas in the Qur'ān: The Qur'ānic Account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian Local Tradition," *JSAI* 28 (2003), 11-39; G. Dye, "La nuit du Destin et la nuit de la Nativité," in G Dye & F. Nobilio (eds.), *Figures bibliques en islam*, Bruxelles-Fernelmont, EME, 2011, 107-69.

67 See Tesei, "The Romans will win," 19.

68 R. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of the Islamic Empire*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2015, 94-5.

individuals would have served as transmitters of Byzantine propaganda. The Heracleian idea of heavenly recompense for soldiers who die on the battlefield was transmitted to the early Muslim community when individuals who previously had served the emperor in the conflict against the Sasanians joined the new community of believers. The possibility that other elements of Byzantine war propaganda may have entered the Qur'ān through this channel makes this model of transmission more intriguing.[69]

5 Final Remarks

There is a curious tendency in current scholarship to acknowledge the relationship between the Qur'ān and Late Antiquity while simultaneously rejecting any direct connection between concepts, ideas, beliefs, and stories in the Qur'ān and those found in late antique texts. Common elements between the Qur'ān and the writings of the late antique world are mostly explained through recourse to the notion of "shared culture" without trying to explain the dynamics of this cultural sharing. The Qur'ān is read in conversation with the complex of ideas expressed in other late antique documents, without, however, attempting to delineate the historical circumstances that may lie behind the circulation and transmission of those very same ideas. This widespread historical agnosticism would appear to be largely a result of scholarly caution, which is motivated by the notoriously precarious reliability of the extant historical sources. While understandable, this scholarly prudence often results in the renunciation to investigate the dynamics behind the genesis of the Qur'ānic corpus.

A more pernicious tendency – equally present in current scholarship – is the paternalistic (surely post-colonialist, but perhaps also neocolonialist) attitude of Western scholars towards Islam. This tendency, which I call "Qur'ānic exceptionalism," leads scholars to dismiss, in the case of the Qur'ān, what would seem to be plausible to scholars in any other field of study. In most cases "Qur'ānic exceptionalism" is dictated by the commendable intent to oppose current and deplorable Islamophobia spread by Western politicians and media – often combined with the perpetual battle against the phantom of classical Orientalism. However noble its aims may be, "Qur'ānic exceptionalism" inhibits any critical analysis of the Qur'ān's relationship with its historical context.[70]

69 See Tesei, "The Romans Will Win!," esp. 19-23.

70 On this issue, see the observations by Hoyland in *In God's Path*, 63, and by Shoemaker in *The Apocalypse of Empire*, 181 ff.

Indeed, while formally acknowledged as a late antique text, the Qurʾān is treated as an exception to the type of critical historical investigation commonly applied to the study of other late antique documents.

In this article I have tried to avoid both agnostic and exceptionalist tendencies and to identify possible historical circumstances to explain the connection between a concept attested in the Qurʾān and in contemporary Byzantine writings. The reference in these sources to the idea of heavenly reward for dying in battle requires – I think – a better explanation than a shared culture, since this specific idea does not appear to have been sufficiently current to be considered "culturally shared." The development of the figure of the fighting martyr, and attempts to associate this figure with soldiers, is connected to the sacralization of warfare during the reign of Heraclius. The idea that fighters may hope for a spiritual reward for deeds performed on the battlefield appears to have been an innovation that was almost unprecedented in earlier understandings of martyrdom. The only exception to this rule is the Armenians, who appear to have developed the idea of military martyrdom no later than the middle of the 5th century CE. The Armenian characterization of dead soldiers as martyrs is not disconnected from the ideas promoted by Heraclius during his Persian campaign. It has been argued that the emperor consciously adopted Armenian rhetoric on military martyrdom to raise the morale of his troops. The size of the Armenian contingent in the Transcaucasian force, keystone of Heraclius' army, surely motivated his choice of this specific rhetorical set. The emperor harangued the soldiers with familiar tropes and *topoi*. It was in these historical circumstances that the idea of military martyrdom received a wider audience and that individuals from other areas of the Byzantine world became familiar with this peculiar Armenian military ideology. However, the new idea of martyrdom must have circulated among a small circle of persons, namely, those directly involved in military activities. Because of its limited circulation, the appearance of a similar idea in the Qurʾān is noteworthy.

The simultaneous appearances of an unprecedented concept in two different contexts may be explained by postulating either a parallel development or a direct connection between the two contexts. In this article, I have attempted to reject the former hypothesis. As I have argued, there are good reasons to think that the Qurʾānic calls to sacrifice in battle were inspired by the work of Heraclius' propagandists. Any scholar who wishes to advocate the alternative hypothesis, i.e., that of an independent, parallel development, should provide solid arguments to explain how the same concept appeared simultaneously in two unrelated historical contexts. Specifically, they should explain the presence in the Qurʾān of an idea previously attested only in Armenian society, without postulating a connection with contemporaneous Byzantine

propaganda, which represents, however, the only plausible means of the (relative) popularization of the Armenian understanding of military martyrdom. Alternatively, they should provide evidence that the concept of military martyrdom circulated widely prior to Heraclius and that the rhetorics used by the emperor and the Qur'ān developed independently. This argument, however, is not substantiated by sources. By contrast, the presence in the Qur'ān of other literary elements related to Heraclius' war propaganda (i.e., Q 18:83-102 and Q 30:2-7) suggests that the Qur'ān's promises of reward for dying in battle echo concepts promoted by the emperor. As I have suggested, the transmission of this idea from Heraclius' military circles to the Qur'ānic community likely took place through means of either commercial exchanges or the mediation of Arab soldiers who previously had been enrolled in emperor's army. While I consider the latter hypothesis to be the most likely one, I leave it to the reader to decide which of the two yields the most plausible historical explanation.[71]

71 Special thanks to David Powers, Stephen Shoemaker, Christian Sahner, Sean Anthony, Glen Bowersock, and the anonymous reviewer of *Studia Islamica* for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. I am grateful to Ilkka Lindstedt for sharing with me his preliminary unpublished work on Arabic graffiti and for discussing with me questions on this subject.